

Independent Advisory Committee on Nature Restoration

Meeting 2: 31st March 2025

Venue: Custom House

Time: 11am – 3pm

Attendees: See Annex I

Meeting report

The second meeting of the Independent Advisory Committee (IAC) on Nature Restoration took place on 31st March. The IAC received high-level briefings from the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) on ongoing work to support the drafting of the National Restoration Plan (NRP), including the Leaders Forum and meetings of the Interdepartmental Working Groups. The IAC also heard presentations by Committee members as part of a reflection on lessons learned from the implementation of previous EU legislation.

1. The Minister of State with special responsibility for Nature, Heritage and Biodiversity Christopher O’Sullivan TD welcomed the members of the IAC and thanked them for their support in this important matter. The Minister highlighted the importance of the IAC’s independence and the upholding of its guiding principles of openness, respect and adherence to scientific evidence. Designing the NRP should not be limited by resource constraints but rather focused on what is good for nature and for society.
2. Housekeeping
 - a. The report of the previous meeting was agreed without amendments.
 - b. The Chairperson Dr Aoibhinn Ní Shúilleabháin welcomed the three new members of the IAC: Eamon Carroll (Irish Creamery Milk Suppliers’ Association), Fintan Kelly (Irish Environmental Network) and Coilín O’Reilly (Carlow County Council). The Chairperson thanked Joe McGrath for his contributions to the IAC’s work. Mr McGrath has resigned from the Committee to facilitate the inclusion of a serving CCMA member to support improved links to local authority structures.
 - c. The following meeting dates were agreed for Q2/2025: 28th April, 28th May and 30th June.
3. Update on NRP developments

a. The Chairperson and Ms Áinle Ní Bhriain, Director for International and EU Affairs of the NPWS, provided an update on the first Leaders Forum on 25th March. The Forum saw 87 representatives from over 60 organisations take part in active discussions which yielded consistently positive feedback from participants. The outputs from the session will be formulated into a report which will be the focus of an online feedback session is planned for 21st May to provide clarity on the use of stakeholders' views in the development of the IAC's recommendations. Future Leaders Forums will be focused on specific themes and representative groups and held in other geographic locations. A list of all relevant social media channels will be circulated to IAC members in due course and relevant links and updates on the NPWS website will also be provided. The Chairperson proposed the formation of a subcommittee on stakeholder engagement which will include the Chair, Mr Eamon Carroll, Ms Marina Conway, Mr Fintan Kelly, Mr David Kerr, Mr Paul O'Brien and Mrs Norah Parke.

b. Dr David Fenner (NPWS) provided a brief update on the NRP template developed by the EU Commission and approved by the Member States on 11th March. A more detailed briefing will be provided to the IAC once the final template has been published in the coming weeks.

c. Dr David Fenner (NPWS) provided a brief update on the overall progress of the NRP working groups, setting out that three out of four interdepartmental working groups have been constituted and have had their first meetings. Papers have been provided for the IAC's consideration and discussion. It was requested that future papers be drafted to highlight potential decisions to be made to allow the IAC to prioritise certain options based on an as yet to be determined set of criteria which will emanate partly from the stakeholder engagement exercise. The slides of the meeting will be circulated to IAC members.

4. Lessons to be learned from the implementation of previous EU legislation

a. Mr Colm O'Donnell (INHFA) set out the positive impact on nature that previous agricultural practices have had against the background of changing public payment schemes. It was highlighted that the previous practice of designations and associated restrictions on activities that can be carried out on affected lands coupled with a lack of communication has had a significant and negative impact on farmers and the value of the land and that this experience must inform the development of the NRP.

- b. Dr Micheál Ó Briain presented a key set of principles to IAC members that should be considered when providing advice on the NRP based on previous experience with the implementation of the EU Habitats and Birds Directives:
- An understanding of the scope and scale of the planning exercise;
 - A clear view of the role of public and private lands;
 - An unambiguous scientific evidence based to underpin the proposed approach to restoration;
 - Adequate administrative and financial capacity to draft and deliver the plan;
 - An appropriate governance system based on an all-of-Government approach;
 - Clear and transparent communication and information;
 - Effective consultation and engagement;
 - Political buy in and support.

It was recommended that NPWS should seek to engage a communications agency to support communication and stakeholder engagement. It was also highlighted that only an all-of-Government approach would ensure a just transition to new agricultural practices based on the right incentives and long-term funding to enable planning security.

5. Presentations on ongoing NRP work

- a. Dr Michelle Corrigan (Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and the Marine) gave a brief overview of a paper developed on the baseline and high-level national targets for Art. 11(4) of the Nature Restoration Regulation (NRR) which are based on the latest national inventory published by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The EPA undertakes all aspects of assessment and reporting of Ireland's submissions in line with EU regulation and international agreements and is continuing work on enhancing the accuracy of national inventories by conducting ongoing technical reviews. The status of peatland in the national inventory has been revised as a result of natural rewetting processes. As a result, it is possible that the rewetting target can be met on state lands.

It was noted that while semi-state agencies are well placed to play an important role in reaching the national targets, the NRP should also propose targeted mechanisms to incentivise farmers to engage in restoration activities. The Chair proposed to seek a presentation to the IAC on the role of state lands in the NRP.

- b. Dr Rebecca Jeffrey (NPWS, Chair of the NRP Interdepartmental Working Group on Land) gave an overview of the papers provided to the IAC for consideration. Article 4 NRR work to date has been drafted as an initial high-level guide based on sample-based data reported in 2019 under the Habitats Directive which will be replaced by 2025 updates in due course. A template to assess the restoration potential of individual habitat types has been developed on the basis of yew woodland. While Inland Fisheries Ireland's barrier inventory provides an excellent knowledge base to support the achievement of Art. 9 NRR targets, links to Article 4 habitats and species and the latitudinal impact on floodplains remain a challenge. Work on pollinators is proceeding in the context of the EU Pollinators Initiative with work ongoing on updating existing methodologies and Ireland well placed to implement this.

The Chairperson requested that, where possible and appropriate, future papers highlight potential options for the IAC to consider and include relevant mapping for context. Additional suggestions were made in relation to possible considerations in terms of prioritisation criteria, e.g. maximum conservation value, maximum societal value and minimum disruption to society. While the consideration of specific habitat areas is not yet feasible due to the lack of data, it was suggested that the recommended prioritisation in the NRR and the requirements of previous Directives in relation to Natura 2000 sites need to be taken into account.

6. It was agreed that future meetings should be extended to 3-4 hours in duration to cater for adequate discussion time.

Annex I – IAC Meeting 2 Attendees

- Minister Christopher O’Sullivan TD (for item 1 only)
- Dr Aoibhinn Ní Shúilleabháin, Chair
- Mr David Kerr
- Ms Linda Lennon
- Mrs Norah Parke
- Professor Tasman Crowe
- Mr Coilín O’Reilly,
- Mr Paul O’Brien
- Mr Colm O’Donnell
- Ms Marina Conway
- Mr David Flynn
- Dr Micheál Ó Briain
- Mr Fintan Kelly
- Mr Eamon Carroll
- Ms Áinle Ní Bhriain, Director for International and EU Affairs, NPWS
- Dr Rebecca Jeffrey, NPWS
- Dr David Fenner, NPWS
- Dr Michelle Corrigan, DAFM